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Korean Students Want One Homeland and No Americans

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SEOUL, South Korea

ONCE again, South Korea's students have taken to the streets. But this time, rather than pressing for internal democratic change as they did last year, the students are forging a potent link between anti-Americanism and the desire to reunite South Korea with North Korea. Throughout the week, demonstrators, who called for the removal of American troops from South Korea, fought with riot policemen. On Friday, the police blocked a planned meeting with North Korean students at the border village of Panmunjom.

Most Koreans reject the students' rabid anti-Americanism and many retain friendly feelings for the United States. But as South Korea's economic might grows, so does resentment over what Koreans perceive as American condescension and arrogance. Students go even further, portraying the United States as the main obstacle to reunification.

At its heart, the debate on the American presence here — its undeniable diplomatic and cultural influence, as well as the quartering of more than 40,000 American troops on bases dotted across the country — turns on how to interpret the past. Was the United States a protector of Korea, defending it from Communist infiltration and aggression? Or did the United States sacrifice Korea by using it as a proxy to pursue its Cold War battle against the Soviet Union?

For answers, some Koreans are turning to new historical works that offer a darker view of American involvement. It is a past unfamiliar to many Americans, who cannot understand why Koreans could resent a country that has given so many lives — more than 33,000 in the Korean War — and so much money to South Korea. A widening circle of anti-American critics argue that the United States was responsible for dividing Korea into two nations at the end of World War II.

"Our basic task to achieve democracy lies in eradicating the American influence," said a student leader active in the protests, "because the U.S. supported fascist regimes and allowed division by imposing anti-Communism, thereby creating confrontation with the North." Students who advocate reunification with North Korea tend to gloss over the clash of ideologies that divides the two countries, saying that Koreans are one race and one people who can resolve such questions together. When pressed about North Korea, one of the most repressive nations in the world, they say that their own Government has lied to them so often that they cannot trust its dark portrait of North Korean life.

For Koreans, the division of their country is a continual sorrow, and the question of blame looms large. In the waning days of World War II, as the defeat of Japan seemed imminent, the Allied powers faced the question of what to do with Korea, a Japanese colony. The United States feared that Soviet troops fighting the Japanese in Manchuria would sweep southward through Korea and install a Communist government.

In a meeting on Aug. 10, 1945, State Department planners in Washington decided to draw a line at the 38th parallel, with the Soviet Union occupying the north and American troops the south. While the United States said that this was necessary to ward off Soviet expansionism, students here have long argued that Korea was the victim of an ideological battle between the two superpowers. Now some South Korean historians, political scientists and politicians are taking up the same theme.

Although most Americans believe that the Soviets bear responsibility for dividing

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Korea because they refused to take part in United Nations-sponsored elections in 1948, revisionist historians also blame the United States. "The ideological confrontation with the North is not of our own making, but the byproduct of politics between the United States and the U.S.S.R.," said Lee Chul, an opposition legislator. "The Soviet Union is equally to be blamed, but the Americans actually drew the 38th parallel — an arbitrary decision without any consideration of Korea."

Americans here respond that serious ideological divisions at the time were already pitting right- and left-wing Korean groups against each other. "It is more comfortable to talk about the American responsibility or even the Soviets than to remember that Koreans themselves had some responsibility for the division of the peninsula or what followed," said an American who has lived in South Korea for nearly 30 years.

But even those who defend United States motives acknowledge that the American military occupation of Korea from 1945 to 1948 caused resentment. Indeed, the American military government played a crucial role in backing right-wing, anti-Communist groups, many of which had little popular support because their members had collaborated with the Japanese. Many American and some South Korean historians agree that the United States found itself in the uncomfortable position of strengthening the power of the Korean police, many of whom were brutal. They concede that the Americans were unpopular because Koreans had hoped to rule themselves, and that Americans came to the occupation largely unprepared and ignorant of Korea.

Korean students see a consistent American policy of crushing left-wing movements, a pattern that they trace to the current day. They, and some Korean politicians, believe the American closeness to the Korean military — a relationship forged in the Korean War, when Americans began training and equipping the country's military — is proof of American complicity in military repression here.

Indeed, it is this relationship with the military that feeds the most potent source of anti-Americanism —

the bitterness over the May 1980 Kwangju uprising. Many Koreans hold the United States morally responsible for the killings by Korean soldiers of hundreds of protesters, because the American commander has authority over troops in the event of an invasion. Few Koreans believe the American assertion that this "operational control" did not give Americans any say in the Korean decision to pull troops from the demilitarized zone and send them to Kwangju.

The Korean military did consult the United States about moving the troops, and the Americans urged avoiding the brutality displayed by an earlier detachment of Korean Special Forces troops in Kwangju.

Yet American diplomats and military officers say they had no way to prevent the killings. Nonetheless, American culpability for Kwangju has become an article of faith among many Koreans. It is that sense of betrayal, stoked by the accumulated grievances of the past 40 years, that promises continued questioning of the American place in Korea's past and present.